

Matt Reed: Space fate turns on this land

Expert: Winning on price means launching outside KSC

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Our future as the Space Coast could hinge on 150 acres at the northern tip of Kennedy Space Center near the Brevard-Volusia county border.

Once a citrus community called Shiloh, private rocket companies such as SpaceX want to build a launch facility there, beyond the space agency's strict security and regulations. That would require NASA to turn over the Shiloh land to the state of Florida. The agency has said "no" so far. And SpaceX has turned to Texas for a commercial-launch site, although it would continue to service the International Space Station from KSC.

For a deeper explanation, I talked with Dale Ketcham, director of strategic alliances for Space Florida.

Question: Why is this deal so urgent?

Ketcham: SpaceX is not the only company involved, but clearly they're the industry leader — the company we are most eager to attract first.

They are the company most out there and eager to identify a purely commercial spaceport. As CEO Elon Musk articulated before the Texas Legislature this month, Texas is in the lead. He said it's very exciting that Texas is likely to be the home of the "world's first commercial Cape Canaveral." That hurt.

Q: Why does he need land outside KSC?

Ketcham: It's not that Elon Musk wants it, it's that their customers want it — the people who build and provide the big commercial satellites.

In the 1980s, 100 percent of the commercial satellite market in the world launched from Florida. We're now down to zero. That market voted with its feet and left.

It's being launched by the Europeans, the Russians, the Chinese, and now the Brazilians and Indians are getting into the market.

We're attempting to recapture that as a nation through Elon Musk with SpaceX, Jeff Bezos with Blue Origin, Paul Allen with Stratolaunch. They think they have the technology.

In terms of "price to launch" — what it costs to put your payload in orbit — you can go to Elon's web page. It's right there. No one else does that. He'll personally guarantee that price.

He's now got 56 launches manifested. And the head of the Chinese space agency said, "We don't know how he does it, because we can't beat that price."

His government launches will stay here. But what he's looking for is a clean sheet of paper, a green field, to establish a launch operation that has nothing more than what is absolutely required. That will allow him to offer those cut-rate prices. And he can't get that in the middle of the federal reservation, whether it's Canaveral Air Force Station or Kennedy Space Center.

Even if (NASA Administrator) Charlie Boldin and (KSC Director) Bob Cabana promised him he could do what he wants, he would be a fool to believe that. Not because they're disingenuous people, but because there will be other center directors, Congress will assign the agency new missions, and their job is not to take care of you, it's to get their missions done.

Q:What, physically or organizationally, gets in the way at the Space Center?

Ketcham: Well, you could conceivably put a bare-bones-minimum launch site there somewhere.

But there are four big satellite manufacturers and three of them are not American. If they're launching a satellite, they send their people with their payload to hold its hand until it launches. If you're not an American, you have to go through all sorts of security requirements to get on-site that you don't have in Texas, Georgia or Puerto Rico.

Space Florida is trying to provide them with what they can get elsewhere.

Q:The possibility of a prolonged security lockdown, like we had after 9/11, must be daunting.

Ketcham: We're dealing with a commercial market. Those satellites generate so much money that the difference between having to wait a week or not can mean millions and millions of dollars.

From a market perspective, NASA may have a good reason for posing a problem, the Air Force may have its reasons — and they ARE working their tails off to mitigate those.

But at the end of the day, the market doesn't care. Nor should it.